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From Chempaka, the muslim tree of death,¹ to scarf-wrapped banana plants: Postcolonial representations of gardening images in Tash Aw's *The harmony silk factory*

Abstract

Bougainvillea; Casuarina; Banyan; Camphor; Jacaranda; Rubber Tree. At first glance, these trees and plants may appear native to southeast Asia, given the Malaysian² setting for Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* but, as Peter, the English octogenarian narrator, argues in a heated discussion with several Malaysians, these plants are just as foreign as he is. For example, Peter explains, 'Hevea brasiliensis, the rubber tree, came from Brazil via Kew ... Oil palm from Africa, Bougainvillea ... Does it sound like a Malay name to you? Brought here from Brazil by Louis Antoine de Bougainville' (321–22). The reader should note the irony in the fact that a transplanted Englishman — via an author himself who has wandered from Taiwan to Malaysia to England — points out this rootlessness. If these plants really are not from Malaysia, then what heritage and roots can the Malaysian,³ who has long lived under the yoke of colonialism, claim?

PAULINE T. NEWTON

From *Chempaka*, the Muslim Tree of Death,¹ to Scarf-Wrapped Banana Plants: Postcolonial Representations of Gardening Images in Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory*

Bougainvillea; Casuarina; Banyan; Camphor; Jacaranda; Rubber Tree. At first glance, these trees and plants may appear native to southeast Asia, given the Malaysian² setting for Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* but, as Peter, the English octogenarian narrator, argues in a heated discussion with several Malaysians, these plants are just as foreign as he is. For example, Peter explains, 'Hevea brasiliensis, the rubber tree, came from Brazil via Kew ... Oil palm from Africa, Bougainvillea ... Does it sound like a Malay name to you? Brought here from Brazil by Louis Antoine de Bougainville' (321–22). The reader should note the irony in the fact that a transplanted Englishman — via an author himself who has wandered from Taiwan to Malaysia to England — points out this rootlessness. If these plants really are not from Malaysia, then what heritage and roots can the Malaysian,³ who has long lived under the yoke of colonialism, claim?

On the surface, Aw's plot circles around a detective theme in which the reader examines the motives of individual characters in a darkening pre-World War Two atmosphere: each of the three narrators tells of events related to the war and love trysts from their own limited perspective; Jasper, the first narrator, voices his opinion of the actions of his father, Johnny, including the murder of a British colonial figure which unleashes a chain of events leading to Jasper's birth; the second narrator, Snow, who exudes only innocence, apparently sleeps with one or more men, leaving the reader wondering about the identity of Jasper's father; the third storyteller, Peter, later reveals surprising details about Johnny's murderous tendencies and the love trysts. However, at closer glance *The Harmony Silk Factory* reveals, chiefly through gardening references, the complex and shifting heritage to which an individual may belong in a (post)colonial society. Aw's theme of transplantation in *The Harmony Silk Factory* underscores the impact of (post)imperialism on southeast Asia.

Despite the narrative's strong gardening motif, many of its critics overlook this theme and focus instead on the detective context, the structure, and the influences of other colonial writers of the twentieth century on Aw's novel. Since the reader

faces the age-old question, 'Who was my father?', early on in the narrative through Jasper's account, many of Aw's critics focus on this mystery in the text. One reviewer, Neel Mukherjee, writes of Johnny Lim, 'Who exactly is he? A fearless communist guerrilla who works with the grassroots to defeat the Japanese or a dirty collaborator? A self-made business wizard or a scheming manipulator? A doting husband to Snow ... or a womanizing, corrupt, loose-living villain?' (online). Another reviewer, Alfred Hickling, notes that Aw devotes a majority of the novel 'devising a complex, contradictory case for the rehabilitation of Johnny Lim' (online). Paying close attention to how gardening images surround particular characters will allow readers and critics to gain a deeper insight into each character and into the work as a whole.

Perhaps since Aw's piece was listed for the Man Booker Prize, most of his critics target the rocky structure of the work. For example, Susan Coll writes that Aw's 'narrative might have benefited from some changes in exposition to bring the story into sharper focus ...' (10). Reviewer Donald Morrison notes that Aw's work 'doesn't strain to be *The Great Malaysian Novel*' (online), and *Kirkus Reviews* declares *The Harmony Silk Factory* a 'sluggish, awkward account ...' (online).⁴ With the exception of an anonymous reviewer for *The Straits Times* (online),⁵ Paul Lloyd (online),⁶ Alan Cheuse, Anita Sethi and Fong Leong Ming, who highlight passages on gardening briefly, none of Aw's critics scrutinise the gardening thread and its ties to (post)colonialism.

Despite their failure to notice the gardening references, most of Aw's critics — far too many to name here — do discuss the odd parallels the book has with other British colonialist writers, including Somerset Maugham, Anthony Burgess and Joseph Conrad. For example, Hickling describes one section in which the characters slam around the sea as a 'feverishly Conradian segment' (Hickling online). Reviewer Anna Godbersen recognises that the jacket copy presents Tash Aw's novel as ... a counterpoint to the colonial literature of Conrad and Maugham'.⁷ Again, with attention to the gardening theme, readers and critics might obtain a more penetrating understanding of how Aw's references to quintessentially imperial figures such as Maugham tie into the views he wishes to present about (post)colonialism.

Due to the lack of critical discussion to date, and due to the importance of the gardening themes in this work, I will explore how *The Harmony Silk Factory* becomes a test of what qualities the (post)colonial survivor must possess — as demonstrated through gardening images — in order to endure the aftermath of colonialism and postcolonialism. This theme is a very significant one in (post) colonial literature. Peter's rant about so-called indigenous plants, as mentioned in the opening of this essay, boldly unearths the complex relation between botanical discussions and (post)colonialism in contemporary literature as a whole. For example, Jamaica Kincaid, author of *A Small Place*, expresses resentment at her colonial upbringing in Antigua. Kincaid slowly learns that 'The botany she had

studied [as a child in Antigua] had been a catalogue of the plants of the British Empire, from which she had learned that the plants that she and other Antiguanas had assumed to be native to their landscape — the mango breadfruit, among them — had been brought to the island by empire-bound botanists' (Paravisini-Gebert 40). If Kincaid cannot claim breadfruit as a part of her Antiguan heritage, then what can she claim? Li-Young Lee, a U.S. American poet with southeast Asian roots, also ponders the transplanted state of being in *The Winged Seed*: using a convoluted narrative technique, Lee explores the various states in which a seed — morning glory in particular — is transported, whether in his father's pocket, in the beak of a wren or through the caverns of his imagination. Lee uses the seed to represent the reproduction of the transplanted self through sex scenes and descriptions of the morning glory, but this quest to reproduce is hindered by perplexing questions of identity which often lead to fissured representations of the migrant.⁸

The uprooted and transplanted self is a trope in migrant and (post)colonial literature, although this troubled self is not solely represented by gardening images. For example, in the autobiographical work, *Of Water and the Spirit*, Malidoma Patrice Somé, a migrant from Ghana to France to California, discovers that he tends to eat his way through French grocery stores (6) as an impulsive means to resist his neocolonial mistreatment, and yet he struggles 'to be a man of two worlds, trying to be at home in both of them' (3). Le Ly Hayslip, Vietnamese-American author of *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, stares at herself, 'the curious woman in the hotel mirror — half Vietnamese, half American, and entirely bewildered ...' (167). In Lee's case, he and his family moved disruptively from Jakarta to Hong Kong to Japan to Pennsylvania to Chicago. Kincaid's mother also possesses a complex migration history, as she came from Dominica to Antigua, but she does not call herself a native of Antigua or Dominica since she is the descendant of slaves and colonists.⁹ Although their roots trace back to places as diverse as Africa and Vietnam, these migrants are united in their myriad expressions of confusion, resolution and determination as they grapple with their often forcibly transplanted lifestyles.

However, Peter, of Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory*, emerges a bit differently from these narrators, as he represents the fictionalised coloniser, not the colonised. In the other narratives, the uprooted migrant recognises his or her inability to prevent transplantation due to slavery, war or colonisation, thereby seeking to grow authoritative new roots, chiefly through the power of narration. Of the above narrators, Hayslip is perhaps the only one who consciously or willingly migrates. Even then, the fall of Saigon put tremendous pressure on her decision. The other narrators, as descendants of slaves or exiles, did not have much choice. Their works also tend to be chiefly autobiographically based. However, Aw, a London resident who was born in Taipei and raised in Malaysia, steps away from this autobiographical pattern¹⁰ and endeavours to interweave

the narrative voices and lives of the colonised and the coloniser together in three sections narrated by Peter, Snow, a straits-born Chinese¹¹, and Jasper, a bastard of Chinese and English descent. A manipulative narrator, Jasper twists his narrative into an invidious perspective for the reader, and Snow, his mother who naively accepts the changes colonialism brings, is destroyed by the fruit of the aftermath; but Peter, even as an elderly man, holds the reins of authority. He alone reveals the likely parentage of Jasper, and he cuckolds (and effectively silences) Johnny Lim, the Malay around whom the three narratives revolve. Even in a post-war, postcolonial society, Peter does not become a vanquished colonist, a fate that many Britons and Japanese endured in Malaya/Malaysia around the time of the Second World War. For example, Peter ends his tirade on the so-called native plants of Malaysia with a snort: 'things thought of as native aren't always what they seem, and ... they shouldn't be constrained by ideas of what belongs where. Some might say, for example, that since this is where I have lived for almost three-quarters of my life, *I* may be considered native' (323 emphasis original). Peter pays no mind to the furore that results from this statement, and at this point in the story the reader wonders what characteristics allow the uprooted individual — or plant — to withstand the weather-beating of time and colonialism.

With his cape and *Don Giovanni* serenades in which he sings Zerlina's part, Peter seems effeminate at best, and the cuckolded Johnny has the audacity to kill his father-in-law, a British foreman and others who hinder his climb to pecuniary success. The (post)colonial survivor, in Aw's perspective, is not someone who plays a clear-cut role as a 'victor' or 'the vanquished,' as Kincaid calls it.¹² In one case, Kincaid notes that the colonist can become a victim, falling into decline as he passes his prime.¹³ Using this model of the declining authority of the colonist, Peter should be the colonist-become-victim, the generation that fails to maintain its authority.

However, over eighty years old and a relic of the world war that ousted many of the English imperialists from southeast Asia, Peter has lodged his roots in the Malay soil and yet he demonstrates a flexible ability to adapt. In other words, a plant that wishes to survive in any conditions must adjust. Peter, too, survives the Second World War, three years of imprisonment in Changi (Aw 315) and the waves of colonialism by bending with the wind just enough to prevent its breaking his nature. He does not resemble a stiff British foreman who forces the natives to buckle under his will. In fact, Aw underscores the difference between Peter and Frederic Honey, the representative colonist who resides in Malaya. As one reviewer, Luke Beesley notes, 'we see two halves of the British occupation in [Peter] and Honey' (online).¹⁴ For example, in one scene, Honey apologises for Peter's 'un-Englishman' conduct (Aw 144). However, Honey, who calls Malaya a 'Bloody tinpot country' gets a chiding from Peter, who says, 'I shouldn't complain.... We created it, after all' (Aw 167). Aw further underscores how an inexorable will toward colonialism will push the coloniser toward eventual defeat

through a reference to a transplanted rose bush. Peter sees a garden with a Buddha in it that belongs to an Englishman: 'I glimpsed his garden, planted with a single rose bush. It bore no flowers, its branches were spindly, its leaves sparse. It had not taken to the hot winds of the seaside; I knew it would never survive this climate' (Aw 305). Like Honey, this Englishman and his bush do not fit in. Peter learns this need to 'not resist' with his sharp observations of the country around him.

Peter's ability to adapt is most clearly represented by his last name, Wormwood. This may seem like an odious name that Aw chooses to represent the pale, red-headed English coloniser, who may be read as a 'parody of a Somerset Maugham character' (Sinnott online) but Wormwood, unlike Honey or the other Britons who fled from Malaya after the Japanese invasion, does not exhibit inflexibility. It survives. It adapts. In his narrative, Peter explains,

Artemisia absinthium, commonly known as wormwood, is a hardy perennial with feathery silver-green leaves. It thrives in a variety of garden conditions, its fine foliage providing useful contrast to broader, darker leaves in mixed borders.... Even after the garden began its descent into dilapidation, the *Artemisia* remained vigorous, its pale green glowing amid the creeping, darkened tangle around it. (289–90)

So in a wild garden — or a war-zone — where other transplanted plants and people fall left and right, Wormwood remains.

Interestingly, the other lone survivor who remains at the novel's end, Jasper, is perhaps not as hardy as wormwood, but Aw forces the reader to examine Jasper's role closely. This leads me back to my earlier question: does Jasper possess the qualities that the (post)colonial survivor needs? The reader must first recognise that Jasper is not a plant, but a mottled stone. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines jasper as 'an opaque cryptocrystalline variety of quartz, of various colours, usually red, yellow, or brown, due mostly to the admixture of iron oxide' (online). A stone cannot grow, and this representation strongly deviates from the myriad gardening references that Aw incorporates throughout the novel. Physically, Jasper is a suitable name for someone who is a mixture of Chinese and English descent. A combination of Snow, the name given to Jasper's mother who lives in an area where snow never falls, and Wormwood creates Jasper. Toward the end of the novel, Peter reflects, 'Jasper. Clear as crystal, the foundation of a new Jerusalem' (Aw 362). At first, this suggests that Jasper may represent the genuine survivor. However, a stone cannot grow in the sense that wormwood can, but it may be broken down over time by tree and plant roots. A stone is too inflexible. The opaqueness of jasper, the stone, also suggests that the future remains uncertain, unclear. Jasper, the stone, is anything but 'clear as crystal'. Additionally, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, a jasper is also a 'rustic simpleton' or a 'fellow with contemptuous overtones'.¹⁵ These overt significances of Jasper's name further indicate that Aw mocks Jasper's resilience. Jasper himself is a murky, mottled combination. For example, he does not possess the same industriousness as Johnny Lim, and he seems rather consumed by the bitterness he feels toward

Lim and his own sheltered lifestyle. He becomes an icon of the 'children of the dust,' a common expression for Amerasian children,¹⁶ products of the Vietnam War who were shunned by both Americans and Vietnamese. Their hybrid status hinders integration or assimilation into the mainstream society.

Of course, Aw could also be using these images of stones and wormwood to demonstrate the futility of survival of the fittest. Perhaps none of his characters prove resilient enough to adapt to a new or shifting colonial climate. Aw reveals to Christopher Bantick, critic of *The Harmony Silk Factory*, in Naipual-esque fashion, 'Every one of the characters feels like they do not belong. I felt this when I moved to England, and, in a way, even in Malaysia, as I was born in Taipei' (A03). Furthermore, one of the refrains that echoes throughout the novel is Aw's statement that 'Death ... erases all traces of the life that once existed, completely and forever' (118).¹⁷ Peter clearly recognises the futility of continued existence namely through gardening. He is torn between wishing to pay respect to Malaysia by creating a garden, a repository of transplanted plants and trees that will thrive in Malaysia, and the knowledge that no one can ever recreate an enduring Eden or Paradise Lost.¹⁸ As the elderly Peter sets about his task of designing and developing his retirement community garden, he reflects,

[w]hat spirit shall inspire this new Eden? The answer is obvious. Not the great gardens of England, but the ancient temple gardens of the Orient. Angkor, Sigiriya Yogyakarta. I read about them before setting out on the journey East, gorging myself on descriptions of these fantastic monuments now reduced to jungle-shrouded ruins. (241)

And he recognises that the austere French and British gardens will not survive in the Malaysian jungle-monsoon climate:

One shudders at the thought of the harshness to be found in the great French gardens — in Versailles, for example ... where rows of trees are lined up like soldiers on parade. In spite of what the French would have us believe, I have always thought their gardens display a certain poverty of imagination, a failure of the romantic impulse. (245–46)

He insists that his retirement community garden in Malaysia will not be like the gardens of the French:

If anything, this will be a Wild Garden, a creation of seemingly casual beauty, whose charms are quiet, understated. Some of the borders are large and deep, others long and shallow; some are planted with tall shrubs, others with ground cover, many with a mixture of both. (246)

During these reflections, Peter seems to play the role of the imperialist who wishes to tailor the colonised land to his or her own taste, but as Aw slowly reveals, Peter simultaneously and self-consciously recognises the inevitability and futility of this accomplishment. Although Peter boldly states in one passage, '[t]he creation of paradise is not something I take lightly' (246), death does 'erase all traces of life ...' for the individual. If someone attempts to clear jungle land for a garden, it is a constant battle. In a world of big cities like Singapore and Kuala

Lumpur, the colonisation of nature and people seems to be a finished battle, but one might remember Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ozymandias' — the great ruler's 'shattered visage' and 'trunkless legs' are strewn about the far-reaching 'lone and level sands'. One might also think of Agnes Newton Keith's writings in which the Malaysian jungle, characterised by the rampant growth of illipi nuts and *tampoi*, is represented as an indomitable force: 'Light rains continue and every leaf quivers with a leech looping madly with ambition to attach himself to a passer-by.... As the rain grows heavier, so do our feet, the jungle damp creeps like a chill in the bones' (213–14). In a like vein, any clearing that Peter creates will ultimately be destroyed by the persistent jungle. His self-consciousness at this likelihood emerges as he continues to plan his retirement community garden. He states,

[i]n creating a garden, we acquire, by force, a patch of land from the jungle; we mould it so that it becomes an oasis amid the wilderness. It is an endless struggle. Turn our backs for a moment and the darkness of the forest begins its insidious invasion of our tiny haven. The plants that we insert — artificially, it must be noted, for no garden is a work of Mother Nature — must not only provide shelter for the soul, they must be able to absorb and then disperse the creeping darkness of the jungle around us. The decorations do not merely adorn, they protect. They create a place where, at the end of our lives, we may find peace. (256–57)

This passage demonstrates what Peter sees as a paradox: no-one can recreate Eden, a natural work, and yet people continually strive to do so. For example, in an earlier scene, a young Peter enthusiastically clears away jungle bramble to make a place to celebrate his birthday. He gathers flowers and calls it 'my little garden' (221). For this birthday celebration, he also tries to bake bread and serve wine, and he fails miserably (222). Wine cannot be conserved or drunk well in a monsoon land, as the equatorial sun will parch the imbibers, resulting in a severe hangover. Bread cannot be baked easily in a humid land that is better able to sustain soy and rice than wheat. Interestingly, Aw, like Peter, becomes a transplanter. Finding himself an expatriate from Malaysia to England, Aw wraps his banana tree 'in scarfs [sic] for London's marrow chilling winter' (Lloyd online). This scene is reminiscent of the rose bush scene; a banana plant will look as forlorn and withered on an English balcony as an English rose bush near the Malaysian sea.

However, unlike Honey and other British predecessors, Peter consciously recognises this futility, and is able to adapt and survive for several decades in Malaya/Malaysia, as a hardy wormwood plant. He notes upon his return the next day to the birthday garden that he has just created,

I had brought down saplings with a machete, slashed away the shrubby undergrowth and broken off the lower branches ... but now it seemed that love's labour was lost. The clearing no longer seemed as clean and virginal as it had when I left it: its boundaries were obscure, encroached by plants that seemed to have crept into its confines overnight. Outlines of dead logs I hauled away remained impressed on the damp earth, scarring the ground with their funereal shapes. Broken branches littered

the place I had worked so hard to cleanse, and above us the canopy of leaves suddenly seemed more opaque than ever. (332–33)

Lim joins the young Peter in his quick efforts to ready the garden for his celebration, but Peter already is adapting: ‘Johnny and I spent many hours clearing the chosen site of debris.... We talked about the kinds of food the jungle could offer us — some root vegetables, possibly an edible flower or two, fish from the sea in abundance’ (339). Peter’s collaboration with a Malay native and his reflection on using available resources, and not just his English-imported foods (bread and wine), shows that he is able to work with the *bumiputra*¹⁹ and land to ensure his survival.

Although Peter ultimately betrays Lim, his behaviour in this passage and elsewhere throughout the book demonstrates his willingness to use native elements to make them hardier — and not to squash them under his thumb. In many instances, Aw provides a clear glimpse into the importance of culling the best of many products from many cultures to create a better climate for the postcolonial survivor. He does this most obviously through Peter’s use of some Malay terms. Tongue in cheek, Peter swears that he has never picked up any language: ‘after sixty years of living here, the process of linguistic osmosis hasn’t worked ... I have remained wonderfully impervious to Malay and Chinese ...’ (236). Yet in the same breath, he adds, ‘my English ... has been leeches out of me’ (236), and in another passage he repeats, *hujan*, the Malay word for rain (358). Peter is subject to ‘linguistic osmosis’, despite his claim to the contrary.

Perhaps the most powerful description in which Aw demonstrates how a combination of old and new cultures will ensure survival of the postcolonial individual and society, emerges through a seduction scene that reveals itself somewhat like a Shakespearean play-within-a-play with overtones of shadow puppetry, a popular Malay pastime. These storytelling techniques are, again, mixed in with myriad allusions to gardening. Peter remarks, as he unfolds a twist on an earlier scene, ‘the first player stroll[s] on to the stage, skirting the ramparts of the gorgeous painted set’. He then mentions star-crossed lovers (351), like *Romeo and Juliet*,²⁰ and by the end of the scene in which Peter apparently seduces Snow, ‘the ruin has faded into the distance and we find ourselves in a clearing in the forest, a strange garden of restrained beauty, adorned by a single frangipani tree’ (353).²¹ Since Snow notes this tree in her earlier narrative, too, by odour, the reader begins to recognise the indication that a rape-seduction may have taken place, and then Peter concludes, ‘

Only the two true lovers remain. They sink to the ground in desperate embrace. He kisses her brow. Only now do they both realise that they have found someone who cares for them. It is the only moment of truth they will ever experience in their whole lives. The spotlight expires and the lovers dissolve into the deep dark night. (353)

This reference to lovers in shadows — as in shadow puppetry — demonstrates that readers may not have a three-dimensional insight into what transpired.

Since the reader only hears about the rape-seduction from Peter, and not from Snow, who abruptly lowers the curtain on reference to the scent of the frangipani tree, or *chempaka*, the Muslim tree of death (314), the reader is left wondering whether the sex was consensual — perhaps to Peter it was, if it occurred — or non-consensual, for how can sex between a white male coloniser, if one may call Peter such, and a colonised subject female ever be anything but rape? Regardless, Peter closes his play-scene with these words:

I watched her bathe in the cold dawn stream.... I sat naked on the grassy bank, my wet skin prickling in the dewy air.... Even then I knew, of course, that we would never be together again.... Only we would know what had passed between us. I wanted to believe that this secret acorn would flourish in its hiding place and one day grow into a stately invisible oak; but even as we walked back through the lightening dawn I knew it would not happen. Our secret was always destined to fester, growing more unhappy with each passing day, for such is the bitterness of Wormwood: it poisons everything. (353)

These words could signify that Peter's seed did not take (and that someone else's did — that of Honey, perhaps, or the Japanese officer, Mamoru Kunichika, with whom Snow flirted) or that his seed did take, but was not the oak he wanted, but the bitter wormwood (or Jasper).

Additionally, Aw's numerous implications regarding Peter's effeminacy may cause the reader to question the reliability of his account. For example, in one scene, Peter recalls his jealousy at seeing Snow and Kunichika swimming together, a scene Snow also possibly censors. Peter reflects,

The bitter seed had been sown inside me. I tasted it at the back of my mouth and felt its dark, dirty tentacles creeping slowly inside my body, probing for where I was weakest.... My dreams [that night] were filled with a single repeating image, that of Kunichika violently ravishing Snow.... They pointed at my limp penis ... I tried furiously to resurrect it, pumping it with both fists. (293–94)

As a result, the reader may wonder if Jasper is actually Kunichika's child — or Honey's. Aw's ambiguous references to Jasper's 'pale and unblemished skin' (18), do not provide a clear answer, as he also describes Kunichika's skin as 'white' (309) several times. A reader might conclude that Snow has had sex with all three men — Honey, Peter and Kunichika — but I stand by my argument that Peter remains the sole penetrator. The reader cannot take too seriously Aw's insistence that Peter is just an effeminate 'parody of a Somerset Maugham character', for Peter's role is far more capricious than that of a mocked colonial figure. Aw acknowledges that he himself is the 'flipside of his character Wormwood' (McMillan online), and yet his essence cannot be extracted from Wormwood's, as Aw, too, is an outsider who crosses boundaries.

If Aw really wanted to shake the colonial roots in his novel, he would have let Lim speak. As Alice Jones, a reviewer of *The Harmony Silk Factory*, states, 'it's an interesting feature to have a book centred around a person who is only ever looked at through the eyes of others' (2005b online). This work cannot shake its

Maugham, Conrad and Burgess influences if its colonised native, Lim, cannot use his own voice to express his views. In an interview, Aw even confesses, 'I wanted the narrators to talk about Johnny more than they finally did. I realised that even when they talked about him, they were actually revealing more about themselves' (Nayar online). Lim becomes subject to voyeurism; despite his pecuniary success, he remains a voiceless, cuckolded native. The reader should also note that Lim, who has a knack for repairing machines, expresses virtually no interest in gardening. Aw's myriad evocations of survival of the fittest in a (post) colonial climate, discussed throughout this essay, support my conclusion. In other words, like Honey, Lim's inexorable will breaks him. Lim represents the wild Malaya: the more the British (or Japanese) try to box Lim and his country into a neat, English garden, the more the jungle and Malaya/Malaysia will resist until death. For example, in one passage Peter and Lim (a staunch communist) discuss survival in an impending war zone:

If I choose correctly, if I help the Japanese, I will have everything I desire. They will protect me. I will be richer than TK Soong [Snow's father], richer than anyone else in the valley, more powerful. But if not, then I lose everything I have. My shop, certainly, but also my wife. (334)

Peter replies, 'Principles are one thing, survival is another' (334). The reader is never entirely certain, however, if Johnny ever allies with Kunichika. Snow's sudden death and Lim's obituary suggest otherwise: 'it is believed Kunichika attempted to coerce [Lim] to aid the Japanese military efforts.... Rumours of Mr Lim's collaboration with the Kempeitai [the Japanese secret police headed by Kunichika] were rife but never substantiated' (338). Jasper's repeated lamentations on his father's inflexibility further reveals that Lim emotionally died when Snow died, thereby underscoring his inflexibility. He only existed as a pecuniary machine until his physical death in his seventies.

As a result, Peter alone shows a growing ability to work with Malaya/Malaysia's soil and people to create a garden or a land that respects the old by making it stronger and mixing it with new elements. For example, in regard to his retirement community garden on which he reflects many years after his birthday garden, Peter notes,

My garden ... will travel to China and Japan and other temperate Eastern climes, proudly displaying cloud-pruned Japanese holly, Chinese peonies, pink cherry blossom, bitter orange, tiny gnarled bonsai. Thus I will emulate not only Victorian gardeners but Oriental emperors too, the very ones who created the gardens that first inspired this endeavour. Like the Emperor Chenghua, I will create a microcosm of all that is beautiful here. (267)

For, as he argues in the passage I used in the opening of this essay, 'things thought of as native aren't always what they seem, and ... they shouldn't be constrained by ideas of what belongs where' (323). By making a hybrid garden, Peter ensures the survival of transplanted plants — and people.

Aw himself does not believe in shoving people into categories of ‘what belongs where’ which is why Peter insists he can crisscross social and other boundaries despite his impishly pink skin. Aw spent his formative years in Malaysia, but he has lived in England for fifteen years (Newman 5). As a result, he, too, crosses boundaries, sometimes as an insider, other times as an interloper. His London flat is Victorian-style, all done by his own hand (Newman 5). Born in Taiwan, can he consider himself as Malaysian, as a successful writer in which literature is not highly regarded in a science and engineering-driven society? (Newman 5).²² Aw is a case in point where the aspect of colonialism merges with the next generation so synthetically that it really can no longer be called colonial. Aw explains, ‘I’m not self-conscious of writing to a Western audience, but I am conscious just in general about writing a novel that crosses lots of boundaries.... The world we live in now is so exposed to different cultural sources it’s probably less of a problem than we think it is, and we do Hoover up influences from all over the place’ (Newman 5).

Another Malaysian interloper-writer, Lloyd Fernando, born in Sri Lanka, also speaks at length in his scholarly writing of this appropriation of cultures and languages, which thereby renders the term, colonial, obsolete. His words echo Aw’s attitude toward ‘Hoovering up’ myriad influences. As Fernando’s wife, Marie, explains, the use of English in Malaysia is

no longer colonial. You can’t call it colonial anymore. It’s been taken over by all the different countries in which English was left as a legacy. You have Indian English, and West Indian English, U.S. English and all the other varieties of English. So, it no longer just belongs to England.... A language does not just consist of words. It has a whole history and culture behind it. A whole history of ideas. And you can’t just clean that out. And the best way to master English and the globalization that is taking place, is not to reject English or to use it merely as a utilitarian tool, but to understand its cultural roots and its creativity best experienced in its literature.... But a great debate is still going on about the cultural legacy left by the English on the native peoples. How do you handle it? How is it justified? Do you just remain resentful and reject it? Or do you try to make it your own just as much as your own native language? (9)

Peter, and others like Aw, consciously play this game via gardening; they incorporate the language, the cultural habits, and the plants, trying combinations of old and new to create a stronger synthesis. Can a new type of banana plant emerge in London? Can the origins of the banana plant really be relegated to a southern clime, when non-human transplanters, such as birds, also play the gardening game? In one passage, Peter says,

I don’t suppose anyone will ever know the mysteries of migration. I have always loved the idea of being a migrating bird, a hawk or some other raptor, riding the warm thermals across the vastness of continents, all of Asia under my wings.... There would be no plan for my journey, no map, no coordinates. And yet I would find my way, guided by forces too powerful and ancient for me to discern; I would simply follow my destiny. (295–96)

The bird, long a carrier of seed, confounds the ‘mysteries of migration’ (295), demonstrating that the human-coloniser is not the only one who grapples

with transplantation. Peter may consciously plant lily-of-the-valley, which may 'become naturalised' in Malaysia and eventually 'exported back to England' (267) as may his feathered friends, a practice which forcefully undermines the ability of the (post)coloniser to uphold his or her role as the unvanquished Ozymandias of southeast Asia.

NOTES

- ¹ *Chempaka* is the Malay word for frangipani (*The Harmony Silk Factory* 314).
- ² In this essay I have been careful to distinguish between Malaya and Malaysia. After the Second World War, Malaya became Malaysia, so references to 'Malaya' indicate the pre-war-time period.
- ³ A Malay is someone who is considered to be a Malay, and therefore a Muslim, by birthright. A Malaysian is not necessarily someone who is a Muslim Malay; a Malaysian can be someone who is of Chinese or Indian descent who lives in Malaysia.
- ⁴ 'Aw, Tash: *The Harmony Silk Factory*. (Book Review)', *Kirkus Reviews* 73.1. See also the review from *Publisher's Weekly*, in which the reviewer states, 'Aw's prose, though often witty and taut, is not equally convincing in all its guises' ('*The Harmony Silk Factory*. [Book Review]'. *Publishers Weekly* 252.7 [Feb 14, 2005]: 52.

Hickling notes, 'unreliable narration is a tired old trope now, and the reader is left to make up his or her own mind whether the obfuscation and contradictions inherent in this [work] are a product of the book's maddening inconsistency, or its mysterious appeal' (online). Hickling, who compares the narrative to a 'bolt of raw silk' (online) perhaps provides the most incisive review of Aw's narrative strengths and weaknesses. See also Godbersen's comment on 'plodding' sections in her last paragraph of her review, '*The Harmony Silk Factory* by Tash Aw: Love in the Time of Communism and Colonialism'. The negative reviews, particularly in regard to the fact that one or more of the narrators has a weaker voice or that Aw's narrative style proves inconsistent, are too numerous to cite fully here.

However, I do not mean to imply that none of the reviews were positive. Other reviewers praised Aw's stitching together of narratives. For example, Tom Adair writes, 'Aw sings it like a chorus, in perfect pitch, in a book to be prized' (online). Fong Leong Ming presents the most astute criticism of Aw's work: 'many other questions litter the novel, requiring an able hand to weave all these threads into a fine tapestry in the end. Which Aw does of course but I suspect, like his intentions to elicit different responses to different perspectives, not all will feel the same sense of fulfilment or satisfaction on putting down the book after the last paragraph is read' (online). In the real world, loose ends are not always tied up neatly in a package, and so I find Aw's boldness in leaving loose ends refreshing, and not troublesome. See also Lucy Clark and Anita Sethi's discussions of 'loose ends' at the end of their reviews.

- ⁵ This reviewer says, 'horticultural metaphors aren't for the faint of heart in the literary world ... look who's done it in the past: Shakespeare compared a woman's lust to rampant weeds and Gabriel Garcia Marquez [sic] created a magical South American world lush with sentient foliage ... Tash Aw, however, tends toward the well-kept garden as trope in his debut novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory*' ('Hot off the Presses', *The Straits Times* 4 September 2005).
- ⁶ Lloyd notes: 'In the tiny yard of a basement flat in London, a banana tree grows. Its gardener, Tash Aw, wraps it in scarfs [sic] for London's marrow chilling winter'

(online). This passage demonstrates that Aw, too, plays the role of the transplanter, even in reverse form as the transplanted.

- ⁷ Cheuse, too, recognises the Conrad and Burgess link (2005), and Maggie Gee mentions one Conradian scene briefly. See also Carolyn T. Hughes' review, in which she references Conrad, Burgess and Maugham; she notes that Aw wishes to 'offer a non-Western viewpoint', although sections of the novel quote heavily from these three writers, not to mention British writers such as William Shakespeare and Percy Shelley (online).

The myriad references to British literature likely stem from Aw's years in England, although Malaysians fell subject to British educational policies, even after the Second World War, and encouraged subjects to read and be tested like British students. Shirley Geok-lin Lim discusses this trait at length in *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*. See her remarks about the 'British style exam[s]', which remained in place until the 1969 race riots and her discussion that 'Mother Superior [at school] was always white' (186; 69). In Aw's own narrative, Johnny Lim reads Shelley to better educate himself; Aw, who confesses that Peter's narrative 'draws from lots of western sources' (Newman online), refers to Dickens' phrase, 'the best of times'; descriptions of the climatic moment on Seven Maidens islands when the war begins and when Snow is seduced or raped resemble Conrad's narratives; Aw mentions chickens when a death occurs in a William Carlos Williams-like moment; and his closing words, '*Consummatum est*', echo *Dr. Faustus* (244; 307; 13; 200–205; 21; 362). The literary references, while intriguing, are too numerous to discuss in this essay.

- ⁸ See my essay, 'Collecting Seeds of Destiny in Li-Young Lee's *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*'.
- ⁹ In *My Brother Kincaid* outlines the ancestry of her mother, Annie Richardson Drew. Richardson Drew's 'mother [was] a Carib Indian of Dominica ... her father, part Scot, part African, of Antigua ...' (72). For more information on recent migrant narratives (chiefly to the United States), see my work, *Transcultural Women of Late Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature: First-Generation Migrants from Islands and Peninsulas*.
- ¹⁰ Aw insists that *The Harmony Silk Factory* is not autobiographical: 'The book is not based on any experience directly related to my family ... [S]tories of the entry of the Japanese in 1940 are imprinted on me. Everyone knows someone who had a terrible experience in the war. When you are a child the stories stay with you' (Bantick A03).
- ¹¹ The straits-born Chinese hold a high status in Malaysia, although they are not 'natives' so to speak, as their ancestors are from China and not from island or peninsular Malaysia. In her autobiography, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim explains that being a '*nonya*, a Malayan-native Chinese woman' and a *baba*, a male of the same status, was 'a position that conferred enviable status in a society of immigrants, transients, and undocumented labourers from China, India, and the Indonesian islands. In the late 1930s, there were almost two million Chinese living in the different political territories of the Malayan peninsula, and only a minority of them were Straits-born, a term I was to hear pronounced with pride all through my growing years' (12; 35–36).
- ¹² I do not mean to imply that Kincaid does not recognise the slippery slope between the coloniser and the colonised. However, she carefully considers the roles of the victor and the vanquished; in *Lucy* she asks, 'How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?' (40–41).
- ¹³ Kincaid's narrator says, 'It was at such a moment in my husband's life that I met him, the moment when defeat, his own, that of the people he came from, was secure' (1997a 217). She also says, 'I am of the vanquished, I am of the defeated. The past is a fixed

point, the future is open-ended; for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lies the seed of my great victory, in my defeat lies the beginning of my great revenge' (1997a 215–16).

- ¹⁴ Another reviewer, Carlo Wolff, calls Honey 'an unlucky colonial opportunist' (online.)
- ¹⁵ 'jasper, *n.*'. This definition also says, '1952 GRANVILLE *Dict. Theatr. Terms* 103 *Jasper*, the traditional name for the villain of the piece in melodrama'.
- ¹⁶ For example, see Christopher Olgiati's documentary, *Vietnam: Children of the Dust*.
- ¹⁷ See also Aw, 4; 149 (in references to fading photos of ancestors); 187; 285; 330; and 359.
- ¹⁸ See the passage where a Malay says to Peter, 'You told me that this garden — any garden — is a re-creation of the Garden of Eden ... It is the recapturing of Paradise Lost', and Peter responds, 'I think I may have been misinterpreted ...' (256). See also Aw, 319 for other references to Eden and paradise.
- ¹⁹ This is the Malay word for 'son of the soil'.
- ²⁰ This scene also has echoes of *Hamlet*, with the play-within-the-play set-up. The whole scene on the island also reminds the reader of *The Tempest*. As critic Mark Sinnett notes, 'There ensue ... sea-storms of Shakespearean proportions' (online). For example, Johnny tells Peter prior to their departure, 'If this is primitive then I am a savage' and he holds up his arms in a 'strange gesture ... intended to be theatrical in its effect' (149). In this case, Johnny represents Caliban, in love with Snow/Miranda. This case in point is just one of many in which Aw references British literature.
- ²¹ Upon arriving on the island, Peter discovers the ruins of a house. This scene echoes Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* in the post-war sections. Manicka's text is also multiply narrated, although its plotline revolves tightly around its nuclear family, and does not focus on the impressions of 'white men in white smoking jackets drinking pink gins' (Murray Waldren online).

The house ruins on the island in *The Harmony Silk Factory* also remind readers of 'Kellie's Folly', or Kellie's Castle, near Ipoh, Malaysia. Aw mentions Kellie's Castle early in the narrative (20); this castle was built by a tin and rubber entrepreneur Scotsman, William 'Kellie' Smith, who perished before completing the castle. It stands, unfinished, an icon of the vanquished European coloniser.

- ²² Aw says, 'When I was growing up people just didn't read really. There weren't bookshops to speak of even five years ago. But suddenly there seems to be a huge hunger for books' (Newman, 5). During my six-week stay in Malaysia with the Fulbright-Hays program, I saw little evidence of encouragement for writers although I visited bookstores in the major cities such as Kuala Lumpur; school administrators praised students with math and science abilities, refusing to acknowledge that students might have interests in the arts. For example, the top sixty percent of students in a given school will study the sciences and mathematics if they do well in tests. The remaining forty percent is relegated to the humanities. When asked what happened if a top student wanted to study the humanities, administrators disregarded the folly of this notion.

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